

Socialist Realism as Cancel Culture for the Bulgarian Scenographic Practice

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Abstract: *The paper presents some emblematic examples from the Bulgarian theatrical history, in which the culture of rejection has been ruthlessly applied even to artists loyal to the regime. Most significant one is with scenographer Svetoslav Genev. For the first time in the history of Bulgarian theatre a set designer became a manager director. He rose to this position thanks to his personal qualities and ambition as well as to the strong Communist connections his family had. During the period of his as being a director he creates one of the most impressive designs for a theatre performances, rejecting Socialist Realism as an official method in arts. Despite his strong positions in Communist Party, after the Prauge Spring everything, he was largely thrown out of public life.*

Key words: *Bulgarian theatre history; Set design; Communist regime; Svetoslav Genev; Vili Tsankov.*

For the Bulgarian society today and more specifically for theatrical practice, Cancel Culture is both something new and actually not so new. Although it's hard to pinpoint categorically any examples of such a practice in our days, if we look at the concept historically, we can see that there has been a system based entirely on a similar principle. Rejection, denial, deletion and effacing of whole trends in art, 'inappropriate' persons, organizations, initiatives, and their replacement by politically-convenient figures, forms and models, was a practice specific to totalitarian regimes, created to serve and defend a particular ideology. Although one cannot unambiguously describe the Communist regime, or the imposition of Socialist Realism in art, as cancel culture in the sense it has nowadays, one can nevertheless see some basic resemblances and associations that stand out when comparing both situations.

But what is in common between the imposition of socialist realism in the art of the middle of the last century and today's cancel culture? Primarily this is the practice of replacing people and methods judging them for their past or presents behavior or ideology which are politically inconvenient, dubbed 'incorrect' and most of all disloyal to the current situation and attitudes in the society. Another essential element is the censorship that artists impose on themselves to avoid being the object of repressions and therefore



rejection, which also predetermines their way of expression. A comparison between cancel culture and the totalitarian regimes and their methods of replacement is probably largely exaggerated, but it is in extremities that nuances can best be seen, especially those lines that can be traced in our days as well, coded under the guise of political correctness, but increasingly similar to the patterns of the 1950s, forcing people – nowadays, in a delicate manner – to reshape their choices and even conceal or revise parts of their biographies. The repressive system of replacement was extremely sensitive even to otherwise stalwart communists who were nevertheless connected to the former regime in one way or another or had the so-called bourgeois family roots. Their art and private lives were carefully monitored, and every instance of their public appearance was carefully controlled by the authorities and most strictly by themselves. Before seeing a few specific examples of how socialist realism played the role of cancel culture regarding scenography and scenographers, we must look at how it was imposed as a generally valid method in arts and especially in theatre.

The period of Communism in Bulgaria began after the coup of 1944 and continued up to 1989, when the internal opposition within the Bulgarian Communist Party removed Todor Zhivkov from the highest state and political positions he had occupied for 35 years. After the establishment of the Soviet model of governing the country in 1948, the theatrical practice in Bulgaria soon fell into the dark period designated as dogmatic or normative socialist realism (Doynov, 2011, 68). This period predetermined the development of theatrical processes, replacing them and setting an artificial direction not only in the development of theatre but also of all arts and of social and political life. The first few years after the coup were the time of brutal repressions, persecutions, arrests, with politicians, public figures, artists disappearing without a trace or sentenced by the so-called ‘People’s Court’. The Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1948 is the first key political event of the period at which the overall perspective was set for the country’s development in the following years. This congress was the starting point for the methodical imposition of socialist realism as the sole possible method in art, which remained mandatory, with more or less force, in three separate phases: the dogmatic phase of 1948-1956, the phase of the ‘thaw’¹ in 1956-1968, and its wane in the mid-1980s. Its most severe form is the already-mentioned dogmatic socialist realism in which the unification of creative approaches effaces all memory of individuality, style, and expression of a personal position and one’s own approach or interpretation, cancelling the free choice of themes and creative methods. In the years of Stalinism, or the dogmatic period, the method became the single possible approach one could apply to create the ‘correct’ work of art. It was compulsory for such a work to be Party-centered, idea-ridden, people-oriented, mass-adapted, etc. (Nikolova; 2020) By the strict imposition of these principles, the natural processes of development of Bulgarian art

¹ The Khrushchev Thaw was the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s: on the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, taking place in February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed the de-Stalinization and denounced Stalin’s cult of the leader.



and culture were interrupted and caught in the ideological grip of the time, where all attempts to oppose the official line drawn by those in power was mercilessly punished even when coming from fervent supporters of Communism. This approach of repressions and replacement had several dimensions in the different phases of Communism and in the march of socialist realism on the Bulgarian stages. In its dogmatic years, the replacement was complete, and no other styles or forms could exist, but in the next phase, socialist realism began to widen its range and include some aesthetic conceptions that were unthinkable before 1956, such as some neo-avant-garde ideas of space. Examples of this double game will be provided further.

The visual side of the performance and the play itself were literally changed in the span of one theatrical season. Thus, the allegorical scenic environment disappeared, along with the generalization and laconism of form, the symbol, the sign, the abstract environment, and the symbolism of colors disappeared from the productions of the National Theatre, the most important theatrical institution back in the day. All of that had been a conquest of the set designers who, along with stage directors, had succeeded, in the interwar period, to free themselves of the obligation for the theatrical scenery to 'describe' the place of action. The direction they established is that scenography, on a par with directing and acting, should create meanings and add to the message of the performance. Not long after the Communist coup, this was replaced by the representational scenery that photographically imitates reality, whose prototypes can be traced back to mid-19th century through Naturalism and Realism. According to Polish researcher Edward Mozejko, the basis of the method are those techniques of depicting reality that were characteristic of 'Traditional Realism'². The photographic depiction of reality should in fact be understood as, rather, its distortion, since, as Mozejko concludes, 'socialist realism proposes a correction of reality' (Mozejko, 2009, 28). Therefore, 'reality' in this '*corrected world*' is not an automatic or photographic copy of everyday life. And here comes one of the paradoxes of the 'method' – what artists are obliged to depict is not the actual reality for anybody. It is this fact that generates the greatest contradictions – what is the reality on the stage? Can human lives and relationships be depicted by 'unrealistic' means?

As early as 1948, the first examples of this replacement appear, and the imposition of the unified method of Socialist Realism practically abrogated the interwar artistic achievements of Bulgarian scenographers. Those who didn't agree were forced to abandon their active stage work in the theatre. Such is the example of Ivan Penkov, the 'forefather' of scenography in Bulgaria, who was banned from the theatre for five years, and when the performance *Don Carlos* returned, his set design was subject to heavy criticism for its allegorical nature. This was achieved by the clear line of the volumes on the stage, the delicate hints at the historical period, by weaving certain details and by the use of a color palette reminiscent of Spanish painters Velazquez and El Greco. Every

² This is what Mozejko calls 19th-century Realism.



object on the stage that was represented only by its outline or parts of it was already a premise for 'interpretation', which is the great problem of Socialist Realism.

The case of this theatre production is an epitome of the eagerness of critics to please the powers-that-be, an attitude that brought artists to the point of being rejected or acclaimed – or both - a few times within a single day. *Don Carlos* had its opening in 1955, and, throughout the next two years, the same critics' reviews changed, due to the trend set by the authorities and the 'thaw', from utter negation to proclaiming him a herald of the renovation of Socialist Realism. Before this second moment, however, not only was the scenographer marginalized and libeled, but hardline communists often denounced his students as the disciples of a formalist.

The culture of cancelling, however, did not end with Stalin's death in 1953 or with the 'thaw' that Khrushchev announced in the Soviet Union in 1956. Quite the opposite. It acquired even more complex and often contradictory manifestations until the very end of Communism. The denunciation of the cult of personality marked the beginning of the decline of the dogmatic method. According to researchers such as Plamen Doynov, 1956 can also be seen as 'the year that marked the beginning of the end for the regime' (Doynov, 2011, 91). Once started, the process of liberalization was hard to interrupt and there was no going back to the former situation. It gradually led to the collapse of the totalitarian system. The door that opened to the system's liberalization could be entirely closed only with great difficulty. And although the regime was tightened a few times again before the end of Communism in 1989, that was imposed with considerably greater care. Basic notions like 'socialism', 'Party-centeredness', 'people-orientation', 'socialist realism', etc. were shaken and more democratic interpretations replaced dogmatic views.

The intelligentsia and the artists felt the opportunity for liberalization and started to fight for their right to free their individual perspective, style, interpretation from the oppressive Socialist Realism. Their attempts to 'abrogate' the censorship increased. However, the state apparatus continued to create negative effects for them, much more complex and concealed than the direct and unambiguous canceling. And while in most of the Eastern Bloc the concept of Socialist Realism had already disappeared in the early 1960s, being replaced by the concept of 'realism without limits' (Demaitre 1966; Mozejko 2009; Ronge 2019; Yordanov 2018), the government in Bulgaria continued to show intolerance to a large part of the manifestations of liberalization.

One of the examples emblematic for the ambiguity of the communist system in the 1960s is the 'Debate on Conditionality', which had started in 1953 in the official magazine *Teatyr* and had continued up to 1963. During these years, the discussion approached topics such as the need for aesthetic diversity in the theatre performance, as decreed in the USSR, and it became utterly political and injunctive in the mid-1960s, when it became clear that the declarations of reform and liberalization of Socialist Realism were nothing more than a tool of additional control over artists. The direct victim of the sharpening of the dialogue was Vili Tsankov, one of the most active and



highly rated directors at the time. His shows were a constant target of official criticism because of his conceptual use of movement, light and 'formalistic' style.

The director's main point was that in its nature, theatre is a 'conditional' (non-literal), synergetic art³ that uses elements from other arts in order to achieve the goal set by the director. Tsankov emphasizes the leading role of scenography, light and movement for the construction of the form of the theatre performance. From the opposite side, the *nomenclature* critique responded by a categorical yet cautious stance proclaimed in a number of articles. It generally legitimates some more conditional forms of visual environment (scenography) but categorically rules out conditional acting and the abstract dramaturgy, 'detached from reality'.

In the second half of the 1960s, the style of the shows that were staged in Bulgarian theatres changed considerably. Despite the ideological resistance against the allegorical theatre in the beginning of the decade, the scenographers succeeded in putting an end to the debate on the 'realistic' in allegorical scenography, and the full life-describing sceneries appeared more and more seldom on the stage in the big theatres. And whenever this still took place, they were perceived as obsolete. It is this fact that is the positive result of the otherwise devastating interference in the aforementioned debate. Young scenographers used their rich imagination, interpreting some of the conceptions of space that were popular in Europe, such as e.g. those of Brecht and Svoboda, the interest was revived in Meyerhold, Vahtangov, Tairov, Ohlopkov etc. Against this background, the conservative vision reminiscent of the dogmatic stage of Socialist Realism was still present mainly in sceneries for Soviet plays and those from Communist countries, but interiors and exteriors were now built with considerably more frugal means as compared to the previous decade. Only at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s did the constraints of a mandatory method weaken and artists became free from artificial restrictions.

In those contradictory times, even friends of the power could very quickly become its enemies and lose their positions as well as their status in society. The apparent liberalization led some directors and scenographers to believe in the illusion that the power is ready to accept 'constructive criticism'. This, however, was not exactly the case, and the situation of one of the most progressive set designers in Bulgaria, the only one to get close to the brilliancy and boldness of Josef Svoboda can confirm it.

In 1966, in the drama theatre in the city of Plovdiv, a scenographer was appointed as manager for the first time in the history of Bulgarian theatre. That was the young Svetoslav Genev who rose to this position thanks to his personal qualities and ambition as well as to the strong Communist connections his family had. He was an ardent Communist himself, a member of the Party and an activist, both locally and on a national level. It was all of these circumstances that put Genev in a privileged position also with

³ Although the end of the 1950s brought about the first steps in *performance art* research, theory and practice, it was only incorporated in the Bulgarian stage practice later.



regard to his aesthetic preferences and allowed him to unleash his imagination on the stage, his decisions not only being incompatible with the definition of Socialist Realism but also having no equivalent at all in the practice so far.

In his scenographic work, he was an innovator with an extraordinary sense for dramaturgy, and one of the artists who led the vision of the theatre performance out of the replicative, photographically-descriptive scenography. He made sure that the solution for space should create a unified visual image which then, in the hands of the stage director, should become the ideal environment for the actors. Genev's scenographic solutions were consistent and worked out down to the smallest detail both in their making and in the organization of the transitions and the dynamic of the separate scenes. Lighting was an essential part of his view on scenography. It enhanced the overall concept and added to the emotional landmarks in the theatre performance. Lighting in Genev's work was extremely important for the building of the scenic environment.

The emblem of his scenographic practice was his work for *West Side Story*, directed by Krikor Azarian. The play was set a little before the eruption of the so-called Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. The show succeeded in expressing these people's emotions and excitement, managed to translate them into the language of theatre and, from the stage, to ignite the predominantly young audience that overfilled the room at every show. This did not go unnoticed by the authorities, and the bloody suppression of the Prague events in August 1968 was an unmistakable sign that the attempts to have a greater liberalization in the arts were to be shut down. The performances were discontinued, and a large number of the actors, as well as the director, left the theatre.

Besides his scenographic solutions that stand out vividly and are categorically outside the frame of Socialist Realism, Svetoslav Genev had an extraordinarily active role, and a very strong position in the local Party structures. This, as well as his desire to turn the theatre whose manager he was into a place of high achievements, gave him arguments to openly engage in disputes with power and often express his disagreement with their unification policy. Despite everything, Genev remained a manager of the theatre up to 1974 when a scheme was set up in order to make him leave both the managerial position and his job as a scenographer. Not even his strong contacts within the Party could prevent this turn of events, and he was largely thrown out of public life. He continued his scenographic work with a few theatre directors, but he was never employed by any theatrical institution.

The fates of scenographer Svetoslav Genev and director Vili Tsankov are only two examples of the methods used by the Communist system to hold sway over society. Namely, by its public ruining of 'unacceptable' or 'deviant' artists, the Communist state aimed to make a point: this is what happens to anyone who dares to challenge the official position. The contemporary culture of canceling public figures, artistic practices can be seen as a sophisticated method of censorship and restrictions.



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